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The Chief Leaker

President Reagan has gone bananas over his inability to stop news leaks. He intends to use lie detectors to uncover who's passing out classified information. Any government worker who refuses to be strapped to a polygraph machine can kiss his career goodbye.

But I can tell the president who the worst leakers are. Just let me give lie detector tests to the people who stand at his side. For the culprits are his closest White House associates and members of his Cabinet. And the greatest number of leaks are approved right in the Oval Office. Reagan doesn't hesitate to put out classified information that makes his policies look good. Some examples:

- When the president decided to rally public support for his defense budget increases, a senior Pentagon official gave a study of Soviet military strength to The New York Times.

- When the president wanted to bring pressure on a reluctant Senate to approve the sale of AWACS radar planes to Saudi Arabia, the Pentagon was assigned to make selective leaks. Defense officials showed reporters a secret study, complete

with maps and charts that purported to show that the AWACS would not threaten Israel.

- When the president decided to shake a big stick at Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, he wanted to prevent retaliation against Americans living in Libya. Intelligence officials leaked a story that Qaddafi had sent a "hit squad" to this country to assassinate the president. The Americans in Libya got the message. Most of them packed up and left.

The worst security violator is probably the president himself. He doesn't worry about national security when he wants to make a point with the public. That was the case with his so-called "Star Wars" speech calling for a missile defense system. He arbitrarily declassified documents so he could show them on television.

The president saw political advantage in this use of classified information. Either he committed a damaging leak of national secrets or the documents shouldn't have been classified in the first place.

As evidence that the Reagan administration is more concerned about censoring the news than protecting security, I asked my associate, Dale

Van Atta, last year to find out how well the administration protects the real secrets that affect the nation's safety.

He walked in off the street and picked up engineering blueprints of the White House, no questions asked. Yet this is the nerve center of the federal government.

Next to the White House, perhaps the most sensitive complex in America is the National Military Command Center. This is the Pentagon's crisis center. Yet Van Atta also picked up a draft report titled, "Preliminary Estimate Emergency Power Generator for the National Military Command Center." It contains highly sensitive national security information.

But does the president really want to know, for example, who orchestrated the downfall of Anne Burford at the Environmental Protection Agency? For weeks the president was insisting publicly that Burford's job was secure, while his closest White House advisers were leaking a flood of rumors, speculation and damaging facts that undermined her position.